

MAPPING THE DIASPORIC TRAJECTORY OF A DIGITAL - AGE WOMAN:

A STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S MISS NEW INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee, one of the celebrated Diaspora writers, displays significantly the effervescence of immigrant experiences and their desire to repatriate in their cultural roots, especially that of women. In this process of repatriation, the protagonist in Mukherjee's novels and in her short stories becomes alienated and appears like a 'fractured self' or 'a divided self'. Mukherjee in her writings has explored about Indian culture and tradition earlier too and her corpus of writings has won her high praise in the literary circles.

Mukherjee has given a new voice and direction to the women's literature in English. She does not like to be called an Indian migrant author and very firmly positions herself as an American author writing American literature. She in her latest novel Miss New India has shown the unbridgeable abyss between a small-town girl and the ones who live in metros. An audacity has been evident everywhere, in every field, from entrepreneurs to cricketers, from business sector to beauty pageants, and no doubt there has been a really sharp divide between the urban and rural India which is emphatically witnessed the protagonist's new trajectory towards modernisation in this novel. Unlike the other women characters of Mukherjee, who migrate from India to America, or vice-versa, Anjali Bose, is swept away from a very backward village to a hi-tech city, in quest of self-fulfillment, and in the end proves to be a winner when she returns to her village as a self-sustaining woman. The present novel not only makes sense of India's digital age but it also brings worlds of culture and change all together which illuminate each other.

KEYWORDS: Immigrant Experiences, Repatriation, Urban and Rural India, Quest of Self-Fulfillment, Modernisation and self-Sustaining Woman

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INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee's *Miss New India* (2011) is the final volume of a magisterial trilogy which is different in its backdrops and in order to get the taste, the reader need not read either *Desirable Daughters* (2002) or *The Tree Bride* (2004), but the novel itself is so mesmerizing and written so emphatically that one would want to go through its predecessors too. In this novel Mukherjee presents India as a nation which is progressing on the path of modernisation in every possible way, technologically or economically and tells the coming- of- age story of Anjali (or Angie) Bose, a young woman attracted by the bright lights of India's IT capital, Bangalore. The catalyst here is the rape by the man her parents have chosen for her as her husband, and then it is the influence of a well-intentioned American teacher, Peter Champion, who already had her dreaming of a brighter future in Bangalore. In hi-tech city Bangalore, Anjali happens to meet the vigorous and active young entrepreneurs and hopes for a better luck. She resists hardship which she faces in the form of police brutality, gets arrested for a

murder and the terrorist attack by mistake and all this embarrasses her. But eventually, she fights all the odds and realizes her inner strength and in the concluding part of the novel the readers get to know of her visit to Gauripur as a substantial career woman. The town has also become a developing IT centre and is progressive on the road to modernisation. The economic boom in India is rich material which is just waiting to be mined and Mukherjee was quite intrigued by the phenomenal alterations occurring in the country. For writing the novel *Miss New India*, Mukherjee visited Bangalore thrice for different occasions and went to call centres, read their manuals, along with getting involved in conversation with young women who were working.

Miss New India, on the one hand, amusingly skims through the post-liberalization generation of India, fascinated by the foreign brands, staggering in the direction of the Holy Grail of enormous money and swift success, abandoning the remains of morals, values and ethics. As contemporary fiction, it captures the zeitgeist of India and authentically voices the tale of this small-town girl, Anjali. She, a Bihar-bred girl, is nearly ruined by the Bangalore bonanza of the call-centres. Her ultimate despicable culmination, which includes her short stint in the prison, eventually compels her to integrate her confused notions and scattered nobility, and prepares her to conquer the world and her fears again. The novel may be considered as a modern unscrupulous fairy fable, portraying the flamboyance of liberty which the world does not wish to have in women. It is well-written and is engrossing due to some exciting, albeit fictional, facets of the narrative. When the call-centres first appeared on the horizon, these became a reason of debate with generous salaries, the odd timings, language, and the modification of the Indian names into that of more American-sounding ones, the breaking of taboos- and all this later is very properly construed and well-documented in the form of books, movies and even articles. Their impact was extensive, and at random India country was connected 24x7 to the rest of the world.

Miss New India churns out a captivating account of the young generation swarming in the call centres, coffee shops and bars of the present- day Bangalore. The scenes are set inside India, but the American culture and values have played a great role in this work of Mukherjee. She herself has never seemed to be so flamboyant and young than she does through her writing in *Miss New India*. Throughout the course of the novel, she is on the right track: the protagonist Anjali's need for friends, her need of a boyfriend, that of a cell phone and for a guarded and affordable place to live, all this is necessary for a newcomer to survive. This safe place turns out to be the British Raj era mansion and here she boards under the control of Minnie Bagehot. Anjali is taught to handle furious customers in a call-centre and she learns to neutralize her accent to suit the American ears. It is difficult to hamper a small town woman in her 20s who is confronted in a new world; it is more perplexing than what America might have seen happening to Indians in the 60s. Yet it is India, a place where the youth in coffee shops utter things like: "HP's is little loosey-goosey... Motorola's little uptight... they got 'tudes" (*MNI* 90). When Anjali comes to the Bagehot house, two opposite worlds appear before her - one is that of the decaying name and fame of Bagehot house and the other where Bangalore is emerging as high-tech city following impractically the western traditions and allowing woman to grab equal opportunities in all sectors. *Miss New India* is not a cautionary tale of the dingy side of a dream. Mukherjee, in fact, is narrating a tale about the best and worst times of life; she says in the novel, "These were luckiest time to be young and adventurous, and Indian. And saddest for those like her, who knew she could be anything she wanted to be yet hadn't the foggiest idea what she wanted" (24).

Mukherjee's scope is broad but distinct because of her concern with the country in the changing global context despite her narrow focus on one immigrant protagonist and that is her. In the prologue of the novel, *Miss New India*, Mukherjee has intimated the readers with the immigrant concept in reverse direction:

The rich westerners - the Aussies, the Canadians, the Germans, the Finns but specially the Americans - the ones who stayed for months, then years - lived like poor villagers; these rich western kids sometimes resorted to begging and got sick and others died from beggars' diseases. Among them one in hundred or thousand became reborn, with no interest in returning home. They settled down in towns and villages, learned languages, and lived Indian lives. They took modest job with foundation and charities... they professed no interest in American wars, but when India stumbled they mourned. (01)

Mukherjee here comes up with the portrait of a distinguished teacher, the expat, Peter Champion who is definitely not the same in trend with the teachers who, "boasted of medals they'd won in college and alluded to grants that had taken them on epic mental journeys". He was a simple man with great grades when he, "... double majored in political economy and folklore at a satellite campus of a Midwestern university" (02). Such a man can only bring the change in the minds of people against the immigrant notion with his sharp frame of mind and positive efforts to improve the quality of education and brushing up the talents. Rajini Srikanth, a critic, stresses on the word 'bold' to excess while discussing Mukherjee as she "boldly inserts herself into the American literary canon to both positive and negative effect" (187). Mukherjee's boldness, according to Cynthia Sauling Wong, exhibits innovation and a new perspective:

Mukherjee is perhaps the first Asian American writer to exhibit a full awareness of the global context of contemporary Asian immigration: she deconstructs cultural clichés, looks beyond the push-pull between two nations to acknowledge the reality of the world economic system, and sets her tales against a background of intertwined transnational economic activities and mass uprooting. (54)

Through *Miss New India* Mukherjee seems to uncover a parallel truth about India to all American readers supposedly, with the indistinguishable effect she herself experienced in her youth in that foreign land. Undoubtedly, the alluring pull of life in the New India has a dark side. It aims at liberty of the confines of gender, class and cast. It is not merely about the scuffle to get free, but also about re-creation of the self. The portrait of social alterations in India, which Mukherjee has given shape to, provides food for thought for every reader. There are incidents which stick the readers to the narrative, such as the one where the news of a terrorist attack involving a girl from Bagehot house hits Bangalore and the enraged localities squall the mansion, and Anjali finds it arduous to give her clear identity to the police and is unable to convince them. Her insolent awakening to the uncertainty and insecurity of life in this new India leads to her breakdown but she ultimately emerges as a winner in overcoming from this breakdown. Among the people, whom Anjali has to thank for subduing her emotional turbulence are Tara Lata's descendents, Chatterjee's son Rabi and her sister Parvati. Though the type of India shown through Anjali is new, it is incontestably India, the future India.

It is this new India which Mukherjee has explored in her latest novel where Anjali Bose, who finds that being Angie is rather reputed and sophisticated, is the Miss New India and is at ease with the tag. Mukherjee says, "From the backwater of Gauripur, she'd somehow caught the fever; she was part of the bold new India, and equal to anywhere, a land poised for takeoff" (*MNI* 23). The young, gifted and competent Anjali notices that her ambitions seem outsized and gigantic because of her small town Gauripur, where she is born and brought up. She feels that, "A job is the key to happiness, she calculated. A job brings respect and power. Money brings transformation. Stagnation creates doubt and tyranny" (110). Anjali's vigour and enthusiasm is given wings by Peter Champion, her American expatriate teacher who tells her, "Bombay is yesterday. It's a hustler's city. Bangalore's the place for a young woman like you" (12). Anjali, being a girl with immense potential, is his favourite student, and Peter requests her not to fall for a settled married life on parents'

will, but to give wings to her dreams and move to Bangalore where she can put her flair and aptitude to in the new economy. The social isolation which the Bose family faces in at home in Gauripur, is acute. The Bose family belongs to a remnant Bengali community and here is a sea of Hindi- speaking Biharis. This family has yet not recovered from the failed marriage of Anjali's elder sister, Sonali who is now a divorced single mother of a four year old girl living in Patna. She is still smarting with the pain of the divorce and is somehow making her ends meet with a low-wage job. Mukherjee portrays this real situation of a girl (through the character of Sonali) to explore the other facets of society where females after giving approval for the man of their father's choice got suffered and ruined their future for the sake of so-called family reputation. It happens in all the societies where women are treated as inferior to men; humans are comprehended as separate from and generally superior to the natural surroundings. Judith Plant in the essay "Women and Nature" makes clear her point of view regarding the situation of women in the society:

Women have had no real power in the outside world, no place in decision-making. Intellectual life, the work of the mind, has traditionally not been accessible to women – due in part to society's either/or mentality, coupled with a valuing of the spiritual over the natural. Women have been generally passive, as has been nature. (24)

Even after experiencing the trauma of loneliness that has dawned upon the elder sister Sonali, the family does not fall back in pouring relentless pressure on the younger daughter of the family to tie the knot and settle down with an earning, literate beast. Anjali, all the time, has to face these opposing forces with a patriarchal fear in mind. On one side, there is a thought of getting a good match via the arranged marriage system and after that getting settled is not an unpleasant situation. Yet, on the other hand, she remembers her sister's warning that the matchmaking system first appears as a small cloud on the far-flung horizon, but later when the marital monsoon would break, that beautiful cloud disappears and no one in the world would be able to hold the floodwaters back. Then there's the magnet of an entirely independent life in a cosmopolitan city like Bangalore. She has repeatedly been served with an appealing picture of the glamour in the city by Peter Champion and she ultimately cannot resist it. Anjali leaves her place in Gauripur for new avenues in Bangalore with some monetary help and directions to Bagehot House by Peter. Bagehot House is a boarding house in Bangalore which is run by an old Anglo-Indian lady called Minnie Bagehot. She meets three other girls here in Bagehot house, who, too are paying guests as her. Anjali notices that Minnie Bagehot is still stuck to her past and holds her values firm and stagnant in her gradually decaying villa, despite a manifestation of change everywhere. This lets her resemble Anjali's own parents, whom she saw as "irremediably alien, part of a suspicious, impoverished, humiliated India" (*MNI* 112).

Mukherjee views Anjali as a symbol of resistance against complacency. She initially fancies personal merriment and not that of class or racial or tribal privilege. And the extremely fortunate Anjali is able to fetch that personal contentment she searches, that too in good measure. Mukherjee registers Angie's naïve and ingenuous discovery of the fascinating new India; Anjali's migration from Gauripur to Bangalore is as if she has reached to a new nation. All the accents and every attitude posit a feeling of being extremely alien to this lass from her small- town. Yet she gradually paves her way and eventually sets her mark in the world with the help of some very munificent friends. This novel narrates the savage yet emancipating transformation that results from immigration; the only change is that it is not from one country to the other but only from Gauripur to Bangalore. Anjali is a loyal and conscientious daughter of a railway employee where as Angie, the modern rebel, is her mutinous, magnificent individual, expecting a lot from the world than just an arranged marriage. Therefore, the present novel is about that melee between Anjali and Angie where each role which could never be

free of the other. The novel also captures the idea about the city which has come to symbolize this new India, the centre of its information technology industry. This is the place where the call centres built in a novice subculture, where the small-town Indians studied American accents, where day and night reversed and the young brigade began to earn more than what their parents could ever dream of.

Notwithstanding all the opulence, Mukherjee, is concerned about the stability of this newfound economics. Peter Champion gives voice to Mukherjee's views, "The newfound prosperity in this city is breathtaking, and I don't mean to disparage it. Prosperity is a good thing" (162). Champion further says, "But I'm not so sure of the wealth that comes from outsourcing. I wish prosperity was rooted to something. It seems as flimsy as a kite or a balloon. What comes drifting in with the winds might just as easily drift away" (162). Anjali calculates that the city Bangalore was not merely about the global economics, but constituted of a sentimental and moral hurricane, capable of washing away old customs and conventions, and if anyone survived this hurricane, it has a tendency and is capable of increasing one's confidence. The novel *Miss New India* varies from Mukherjee's earlier works in the way that the Diasporic relations stay within the metropolitan cities of India rather than wandering in North America. She has magnificently captured the malaise of a rising Bangalore, along with balancing this zeal with intelligence. Anjali utters:

Bangalore wasn't about global economics. It was an emotional and moral tsunami; it washed away old beliefs and traditions, the comforting ones together with the crippling, and if you survived, you knew you had the spunk and the grit to rebuild. (165)

The title of the novel, *Miss New India*, is remarkable. Mukherjee has attempted to reveal the concept of two dissimilar types of India and their varied cultures – one of which she has been a part of in her early childhood life, full of social constraints and limitations and the other which is enjoying currently, a world of global opportunities. This present progressive culture which is full of life lets a woman grow and create a space and identity of her own and helps to establish herself on a new path of progress as a digital-age woman of the new era.

The novel *Miss New India* draws a picture of India which has never been seen earlier, as a country up-to-date and as traditional as many other places in the world. Mukherjee engages the readers in a vintage plot: A small town girl reaches a big city getting rid of the old conventional ways and discovers her space, her new identity, the identity of being an unrestricted, smart and charming modern girl with an American accent. This transplant is also represented via the change in her name which becomes Angie from Anjali. This makes her feel that she is part of the bold and a new India because in 'old India' women have to limit their identity to the four walls of the house. Their behaviours are coded by the family and are encircled by the social, religious, historical and mythological rules of the society they are living in. In 'old-India' women cannot cross the fringing lines of etiquettes and decency which are linked with the patriarchal side. In *Miss New India* all the facets of the old and new India have been explicitly shown. Sonali, Anjali's elder sister can be taken as the archetypal of the conventional woman in customary India who is married to someone chosen by her father where as Anjali, the protagonist is epitome of new and developed India. She not only crosses all the conventional hindrances but traverse the boundaries of her home exceptionally in order to make her providence sparkling and vivacious. Her description reveals her incredibly strong personality which is unfitted in rural society. Mukherjee writes in the novel:

At nineteen, Anjali Bose was a tall girl, one hundred and seventy- three centimetres – five foot eight- taller than most boys in her college. She was on the girl's field hockey team. She smiled readily and when she did, she could light up a room like a halogen lamp. The conventional form of Indian feminist projects itself through long-lashed

kohl-rimmed, startled black eyes. Modest women know to glance upward from a slightly bowed head. Anjali did not take the world with saucer-eyed passivity. (03)

Through this narration Mukherjee has explicitly depicted what features a girl is expected to have and what makes her acceptable for living in society. In this connection the feminist critic, Suma Chitnis in *Feminism in India* put forth her views as, "The women's issues are different in India from the issues in the West" (09). Chitnis further claims that historically Indian society has, "always been highly hierarchical" (10), and that is with the hierarchies preserved via the traditions and the social behavioral ciphers. She makes a comparison between India and the West, such as in the West, personal freedom and individuality are emphasized where as in India, ethics like getting subdued and the female submission to the patriarch, "self-denial and sublimating the [individual] ego," (10) decided the fate of the women.

Bangalore is entirely unknown to the protagonist of the novel, Anjali. For her help, Peter has referred her addresses of Mrs. Max and Mrs. Usha Desai. Mrs. Desai has a training institute which she runs for the aspirants searching their future in call-centres. Mrs. Max owns a British colonial residency at Kew Garden in Bangalore where Peter sends Anjali for her temporary abode. Anjali notices an entirely different culture and foul language used by the youngsters at one of the famous restaurants, Barista. Although she knows these words and their meanings, yet nobody in her town Gauripur has so freely or openly made use of such sort of words. This India is totally different to what Anjali has seen in her home town. The western culture has taken everything into its grip:

The woman didn't seem jealous or possessive. Most of them were plump and the men already getting stout like her father. Their friendship didn't seem like lead-ins to marriage. The young people in Bangalore had no parents, no nearby families to appease. No gossip or scandal could promise them. They had come from all over India to get away from gossip. (MNI 92)

The pioneering methods, in which the fiction by Bharati Mukherjee seizes one's attention towards the effects of the exploited women, are reflective of the peculiar challenges that the women who have been subjected to brutality and biasness, face in sharing their experiences. She potently records the gendered troubles of women who bear violence and mal-treatment. Rita Fleski, in her book *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, says, "The problems which women share as women can serve an important critical function in making women more aware of and less amenable to their own exploitation." (169) Fleski's standpoint of Mukherjee seems true as Mukherjee documents her individual experience in all her novels with authorial neutrality. Her fiction draws an outline to make people understand the trauma and agony which the women are subjected to in a male-centric set up. Her protagonists are not presented as sufferers. Her women characters in fact forge new tactics to overcome the misery and oppression along with their devastating and shattering after-effects.

Anjali's meeting with Mrs. Desai at her institute and refining her American accents to get a job in a call centre is Anjali's step towards her welfare and a stupendous future. Mukherjee does not at all falter in keeping the accurate balance between a small town Anjali, a credulous resident, who has never even imagined women smoke, and a westernized Angie who learns to handle the vexed call centre customers and is rapid at learning of neutralizing her accent. But she also bears the consequences of her naivety when her female housemates betray her. These girls who pretend to work in a call centre deceive her and then she is repeatedly saved by the male fraternity, the ones who have a firm backing in the society. This perturbs Anjali to the extreme.

Mukherjee states that in the entire process of estrangement and cultural dislocation, an individual feels like losing the meaning and purpose of life. In the agonizing process of migration, the immigrants have to flourish desolately a new hybrid culture as these dislocated people are unable to adopt alien culture totally and cannot either stick to their own home culture as well. Reflecting on this hybrid culture Bill Ashcroft's opines:

Post-colonial culture is inevitably a hybrid phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the grafted European culture systems and an indigenous ontology with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity. Such construction or reconstruction occurs as a dynamic interaction between European hegemonic and 'peripheral' subversion of them. (195)

The novel *Miss New India* ends on a buoyant note. Mukherjee depicts Anjali as a symbol of "light and angles" (MNI 306). When Anjali sets out to fetch her dreams through hard work, she is full of unbounded longings and is fearless for the unforeseen. A lot of new friends and patrons promote her, which included the proprietor of the call centre training institute. After a lot of strife against the adjustment in metropolitan way of living and brawling with shame which she has supposedly brought upon her family by not fulfilling her duty to get married, she comes back to her home town. Her life journey takes a round as she grabs the honour of being invited as a guest speaker at her old high school in her town. Peter has already told his students about Anjali's story saying she had "the spark". (324) He pays, "Thanks to her and millions like her, India was on fire.... She didn't bring the fire all by herself, but she was a collateral beneficiary. He said she was just one in a billion but each of us had it in us to be another one in a billion.... If we were ready to listen and to act, she had lessons to teach us (324). The novel shows that Anjali has been gifted with plenty of luck who is able to meet all odds. She gets to meet the right people and that too at the right time with ecstasy at her hand. Anjali has a psyche of tenacity and persistence and there are times when she seems trivial and calculative. By the end of the novel Parvati becomes family for Anjali, "Anjali had in effect, been adopted, and Parvati wanted to see it all- the school, the old neighbourhood, the studio where Rabi had photographed her- and to meet Peter Champion on his turf, not hers" (326).

The protagonist Anjali Bose proves that she is the envoy of a developing, flourishing and maturing new India as she traverses all the conventional hurdles and dauntlessly exits from the wedlock. She does this for a world of enticing avenues and new trajectory which is no doubt dazzling, splendid, tempting and providing a sense of pride to her and others like her. She, basically, generates the myth of a dream of a simple girl turning into reality. This novel, in its thorough course, sheds light on the various alterations and modifications which have been actuated in India, due to globalization and elucidates the massive transformation of a firm and bright girl of a town into a brash and insolent young Indian woman of Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley.

CONCLUSIONS

Mukherjee emphatically portrays the India of the twenty-first-century in a digital age where a young Indian girl introduces and modifies the American traditions and ethics and eventually decides to stay in the country. With this new gained maturity, she has understood that there is no need to renounce the past while moving on towards the optimism of a redemptive prospect, "Angie the bold one, the initiator, was beyond blame, or shame. Anjali just watched and let things happen" (226). Therefore through the protagonist Anjali, Mukherjee shows that she is full of dynamism and vigour and is in frequent quest for new prospects in the modern 21st century India. Anjali defies her home town like the new generation of India continuously does and thus comprehends her potential. Her story, thus, is an optimistic tale of a young girl's self-empowerment and her chase for emancipation. She follows magnificence and receives victory along with individual

bliss.

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